



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Going And Coming

by W. Scott Cameron

Presently, I am in the process of adding and subtracting Project Management responsibilities to and from my current assignment, and I am developing strategies to execute these changes. As fate would have it, I recently stumbled across the 1994 publication by Dr. Alex Laufer entitled "In Quest of Project Excellence Through Stories," which I had been fortunate to provide a few of the stories in the book. I took some time to reread my stories and was somewhat taken aback by how appropriate they were to my current situation. I thought I'd share two with you since we are in a changing world and thus always find ourselves either "going or coming."

Going

I was being reassigned to a new project management position. Before leaving the project I was working on, I wanted to resolve as many outstanding issues as possible for the new Project Manager to begin work with a clean slate. Prior to beginning this transition, I sensed the project team did not fully understand the engineering process we were planning to begin or what everyone's roles would be in this process. To add to my concern, some people had just joined the project team and needed to be brought up-to-speed.

I had several options on how to proceed with my transition. One would have been simply to let the new Project Manager deal with the problem. Another would have been to meet with the Operations and Plant Managers to share my concerns about the project. Though this option would have been important for its own sake, it would have supplied little detail to the project team and new Project Manager. The option I finally decided on was to provide the new and veteran project team members with the right kind of information to do their jobs. Thus, I opted to implement a "training" kickoff meeting in lieu of the planned project kickoff meeting.

My assumptions about the team's understanding of the project turned out to be accurate. The action I took was the right response. By taking a day to train the entire project team and the new project manager on the future engineering requirements of the project, team members were better able to ascertain the total breadth of their roles as well as understand what stage the project had reached in the engineering process. More than eighty percent of the project team believed the project was further along than it really was. However, at the completion of the day of training, everyone understood additional work was required to meet the project's needs, and they were aligned on their responsibilities.

FEATURES: W. SCOTT CAMERON

Going And Coming (cont'd)

In one-on-one discussions with project team members after this meeting, it became clear that a hundred percent of the people in attendance did not fully understand the engineering process, though none would have admitted to this if asked in a group setting. Thus, the training provided an essential learning forum. As a Project Manager, you must check your assumptions. Look for signs of uncertainty or misunderstanding because people don't always know what they don't know.

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Lessons:

- You should not adhere religiously or blindly to the original plan; rather, based on a continuous diagnosis of the situation, adapt it -- sometimes radically -- to fit the situation.
- You should not consider planning assumptions to be facts. Rather, you should continually review their validity and be ready to quickly revise them.

Coming

Early in my project management career, I assumed project management responsibility for a multi-phased project from another Project Manager who resigned. The Project Manager I replaced had been new to his position; he considered this a simple project and was eager to try some innovative techniques for completing it. His execution strategy called for minimal engineering and construction effort, utilizing just a handful of manufacturing and engineering personnel to complete relocation of existing equipment at small engineering cost. Both the project team and upper management supported his plans.

Unfortunately, under this execution strategy, the first phase of the six-phase project was thirty percent over its original capital budget, did not meet its original start-up schedule, and did not meet the original target production goals until twelve months after start-up. The Project Manager I replaced resigned following the first relocation.

After reviewing the project status, I determined the project's original execution strategy did not have the proper business focus, nor was the original capital cost forecast sufficient to successfully complete the remaining five phases. The original strategy had failed to guarantee there would not be any business interruptions, it had focused on minimizing engineering costs instead of optimizing the overall capital costs, and did not take into account the business importance of each phase of the project.

Going And Coming (cont'd)

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Rather than trying to make the best of the original plan, I developed a new execution strategy, which included a formal strategy for completing the remaining phases. This new strategy defined engineering/project teams for all remaining phases and treated each as a separate project with specific cost and schedule targets. The new plan enabled the project teams to focus their energies and, therefore, achieve the desired business results. Team members were able to successfully relocate the businesses without having to shortship or delay business initiatives with the trade during very crucial time periods.

As the Project Manager assuming responsibility for someone else's project, I learned how crucial it is to carefully develop an execution strategy capable of delivering the business need. If the execution strategy is unable to deliver this need, it is imperative for the Project Manager to have the flexibility to revise, recalibrate, and convince management to alter the original plan.

Lesson:

- There is time for fixing a plan and there is time for devising a new plan. Often it may seem easier to fix the plan rather than devise a new one, especially when upper management supports a "fix-mentality". However, to succeed as a Project Manager, you must be ready to stand by your convictions and confront upper management when you believe starting anew is called for.